The Intelligent Transport Systems World Congress has been held every autumn since 1994. Its location rotates among the three regions that initiated the idea for a global conference on improving mobility through technology advancements: North America, Europe and Asia. This year’s Congress, the 20th, was in Tokyo. Last year it was in Vienna and next year it will be in Detroit.

Wireless communications, GPS, in-vehicle navigation and the Internet were not yet commercialized when planning for the first Congress in Paris began, but it was in anticipation of these technologies that international cooperation was started. Automobile manufactures in the US, Japan and Europe and their suppliers, especially those developing their new navigation systems and map databases, dominated the exhibitions, demonstrations, paper submissions and presentation sessions during the first ten years of the Congress’ existence. A shift occurred following the eighth Congress held in Sydney in October 2001. Almost no Americans attended that Congress due to restrictions on travel from the US following the terrorist attacks. After Sydney, public transport and policies began to take precedence. European and US car manufacturers, navigation and data suppliers and service suppliers to the car industry, such as the automobile associations who were among the founders of the ITS initiatives, began to gradually reduce their participation. The European events, especially, have been almost totally devoid of car-centric sessions except for safety-related advanced driver assistance systems and emergency services. The Japanese automobile industry has continued to consistently supported the Congress with active participation in the exhibitions and sponsorship.

This year it was impossible for the planning committee (of which I have been a member as a European delegate for the past several years representing the interests of the automotive sector) to ignore developments in the highly automated and self-driving car domain. The first Executive Session on the first day of the Congress was devoted to the subject: Autonomous Vehicles: The Path to Implementation. While it was not the first time that a Google representative took part in the Congress, it was the first time that an executive from that company shared the Executive Session limelight with European, Japanese and US governmental dignitaries and executives from the traditional transport sector. Ron Medford, Google’s Director of Safety for Self-driving Cars, presented a case for self-driving based on the safety benefits. He did not offer an answer to the question on everyone’s mind: Will Google build self-driving cars (Ed: Of course they won’t; they will be produced and sold in completely new ways by groups of like-minded people). All he said was that Google is doing this because they want to push development further. This session which had participants from Japan, France and Germany, was organized by the US ITS committee.

There were two Special Sessions on the self-driving theme: Autonomous Vehicles – Technical Challenges; and, Roadmap to Automation. These were also organized by the US and were back-to-back on the third morning of the Congress. (Luckily, they were not on the second morning, Wednesday, when the entire Congress was shut down as a result of the typhoon that ripped through Tokyo during the night.) Steve Dellenback, Director of Southwest Research Institute led the first session and Steve Underwood, Director of Connected Vehicle Proving Center at the University of Michigan, led the second. Presenters were almost exclusively from the US. Both sessions played to standing room only crowds, and there was an unusually high degree of audience engagement.

I would have liked to have seen at least one viewpoint expressed on both the urban planning challenges for autonomous driving and the inevitable long-term effects to the design of our cities and transportation networks that will result, but I expect that this topic will be a subject that will be addressed in next year’s Detroit Congress. I plan to ensure that it is. Detroit is a showcase for the effects of the automobile’s first one hundred years. It will be fitting that the ITS World Congress marks the starting point for that city and many other like it for the next generation of the reinvented car.

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